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ABSTRACT

Middle aged women who have previously been occupied with family and community activities often experience increased role stress when they begin to invest more time and energy in their work roles. To compare coping styles women use to adjust to job changes, 71 women, aged 30-62, who had changed jobs within a 3-year interval were classified into four groups and labeled with a coping style: Wanters-Planners (Creators, N=12); Wanters-Nonplanners (Maintainers, N=28); Nonwanters-Planners (Conventionalists, N=15); and Nonwanters-Nonplanners (Reactors, N=16). Stress levels for life events, demographic characteristics, attitudes, personality factors, job-changing strategies, and perceived job and life outcomes of the women were analyzed. The groups were matched for age, education, number of children, family roles, and level of job satisfaction. Data analysis indicated the groups experienced elevated and significantly different levels of nonnormative stress and utilized statistically different coping styles. Creators were efficacious problem-solvers; Conventionalists were rigid problem-solvers who followed leaders; Maintainers used homeostatic styles; and Reactors were reactionary and repercussive in situations concomittant with highest levels of stress in the job change transition. (Author/JAC)

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Stress and Coping Styles of Middle-aged Women Changing Jobs[1]

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Running head: Coping styles of middle-aged women

Presented at the 92nd Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, Toronto, Canada.

Coping styles of middle-aged women

Abstract

Middle-aged women (N=71, ages 30-62) who had changed jobs within a 3 year interval were classified into four groups and labeled with a coping style: Wanters-Planners or Creators (N=12); Wanters-Nonplanners or Maintainers (N=28); Nonwanters-Planners or Conventionalists (N=15); and Nonwanters-Nonplanners or Reacters (N=16). Variables of stress levels for life events, demographic characteristics, attitudes, personality, job-changing strategies and perceived job and life outcomes of the women were analyzed. Significant differences were obtained among the four groups of women using MANOVAs, one-way ANOVAs, and post hoc chi-square and Tukey's tests. The groups experienced elevated and significantly different levels of nonnormative stress and utilized statistically different coping styles. Creators were "efficacious problem-solvers"; Conventionalists were "rigid problem-solvers" who followed leaders; Maintainers used "homeostatic styles"; and Reactors were reactionary and repercussive in situations concomittant with highest levels of stress in the job change transition.

Stress and Coping Styles of Middle-aged Women Changing Jobs

Prior to the past ten years, the employment of middle class, middle-aged women was considered provisional, temporary, and not strongly determined by male-oriented goals such as economic security and vocational ladder-climbing behaviors. Presently, increasing numbers of women of all ages, including wives and mothers, are working outside the home (Waite, 1981; Williams, 1983) and experiencing role changes and stress. Middle-aged women, in particular, have been preoccupied with home and community activities at earlier ages and now are ready to invest more time and energy in their work roles. They do so with the cost of increased stress (Ackerman, 1983; Waite, 1981) in managing their multiple roles (Giele, 1982). The study is designed to partition out the coping strategies that different women might use to adjust to the job change transition.

Four arbitrary categories partitioned the prior job-separation and the present job-procuring behaviors being manifested. Two levels of job-leaving and two of job-procuring behaviors were chosen as the simplest expression of differences among the groups. The levels of job-leaving were: (a) choosing to leave a job, and (b) being forced out of a job. The two levels of job-procuring behaviors were: (a) systematic and realistic planning for the current job, and (b) not planning for work but taking a job impulsively or taking one that was conveniently available. The four combinations of job-leaving and job-procuring were labeled as: (a) Wanters-Planners, (b) Nonwanters-

Planners, (c) Wanters-Nonplanners, and (d) Nonwanters-Nonplanners.

The hypothesis is that the four groups of job changing behaviors of middle-aged women employees differentiated them in their stress levels, attributional, emotional, and behavioral management of the job change transition. Groups are predicted to be different on various conceptual dimensions--person, situation, and interaction perspectives; and group outcome of the job change based on adaptation or level of adjustment will be ordered from best to least: Wanters-Planners, Nonwanters-Planners, Wanters-Nonplanners, and Nonwanters-Nonplanners.

Methods

Design

The design of this study was a retrospective, cross-sectional, field survey of employed middle-aged women (N=71) who volunteered to share their experiences in two self-report questionnaires after changing jobs within the past three years[2]. A completely randomized design consecutively partitioned the respondents into unequal groups: Wanters-Planners (N=12), Nonwanters-Planners (N=15), Wanters-Nonplanners (N=28), and Nonwanters-Nonplanners (N=16) after the respondents submitted two completed questionnaires. The person perspective included variables of demographic characteristics, personality profile, and perceptions of attitudes. Situational influences were the life events stressors. The interactional perspective incorporated strategies to change jobs, coping behaviors to adjust to change, perceived outcome satisfaction with the

job and with her life. Statistical procedures included multivariate test of group differences by MANOVAs followed by (a) univariate tests (ANOVAs) of separate variables and then by (b) post hoc mean group differences tests were Tukey's test of honestly significant difference and chi-squared test for frequency distributions. This statistical procedure reduces Type I errors in repeated measures designs.

The subjects were women (ages 30-62) who were employed by a large utility company in the midwest. Data was collected from June to August in 1981. The return rate was 65%.

The field (experimental) conditions were the following: 1) the company was undergoing a reorganization and eliminating 11% of the listed jobs; 2) company policy provided for ongoing re-training programs and encouraged workers to update skills and change jobs as necessitated by technology; 3) management endorsed this research study within the company, encouraged employees to volunteer, and provided conference rooms for the on-site group testing; and 4) for their participation, the women were promised a report of the study in a future workshop.

The measures[3] for this study were paper-and-pencil self-report tasks. The Jackson Personality Inventory (Jackson, 1976), job history; group membership based on the combination of job separating and job seeking behaviors; job changing strategies; attitudes about midlife and career-changing questionnaire; Family Inventory of Life Events (McCubbin & Patterson, 1981); Family Coping Behaviors Inventory (McCubbin, et al., 1981); (Boss et al., 1980); Job Descriptive Index (adapted from Smith, Kendall, & Hulin, 1969); and Life Satisfaction global queries (Quinn &

Shepard, 1974) and five sets of descriptive adjectives. The job and life satisfaction, the job changing strategies, and the coping behaviors were included in the behavioral job change management analyses.

Results and Discussion

In demographic findings, the four groups were statistically equivalent by age, education level, number of children in the family, family roles, amount of personal income, and level of job satisfaction. Social characteristics of marital status and available family income were significantly different among the groups, e.g. Wanters-Planners or Creators tended to have more role supports and financial resources. Reactors had the least amount of role and financial resources and Conventionalists had the lowest amount of total income.

In the hypothesis findings, the women were different in the way they changed jobs. In the omnibus *F* tests (MANOVAs) for group differences, the person perspective proved most useful and potentially predictive based on Wilk's lambda and F-values. The variables which predicted differences were: marital status, total income, three personality factors (Breadth of Interest, Complexity, and Value Orthodoxy), and one attitudinal dimension (evaluation of the midlife career changer). Creators had more flexibility and abstract conceptualization in problem-solving, more positive attitudes about life-in-general, more of a sense of inner control in decision-making processes in contrast to Conventionalists and Reactors. The Conventionalists tended to have strong family priorities, were primarily concerned with

their families demands. Reactors tried to fulfill a "supermom" role as mothers and workers similar to working wives in the study of Waite (1981) (see Figure 1).

In analyzing life event stressors, Maintainers had signficantly lower levels of stress, about 2 to 4 times above the standard deviation of the normative group. Reactors had the most stress--over 10 times the normative standard deviation in levels of stress in all areas of conflict. The two "Planner" groups, Creators and Conventionalists, had 5-7 times the standard deviation of stress of the normative sample. Overall, the findings suggest awesome levels of stress among middle-aged women who are involved in job changes (Figure 2).

In the job change management approach, the important variables to predict group differences were: sense of being respected by others, having a sense of autonomy, experiencing enjoyable events, having a broad range of interests, and reading self-help books. Creators were more positive in their perception of aggregate life satisfaction. They were more inner-directed, flexible and generalizing in problem solving, and perceived themselves to efficacious in adjusting to job change. Even so, they women experienced the second highest level of stress. These women were Creators of effective and pragmatic coping strategies. See Figures 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8.

Maintainers sought to keep a homeostatic coping lifestyle as they responded to stress during the transition. They minimized or cognitively reframed problems with a "pollyannish" view, had rather rigid values coupled with other-directedness, sensed a lowered respect

from others, enjoyed life less than the planning groups, and endorsed the lowest level of stress within this sample. These women were Maintainers of their past lifestyles.

Conventionalists were more inflexible in their problem solving and would follow the lead of someone else rather than attempt to develop new strategies as did the Creators. These women also had strong family-first priorities, had the least interesting life, endorsed being somewhat respected by others yet had the lowest self evaluation about their job change. Conventionalists had intermediate levels of complexity with second highest level of stress in their lives. These women were conventional in their adaptation during transitions.

Reactors were other-directed with family needs being most valued. They sought to change jobs in concrete and inflexible ways consistent with employed women studied by Waite (1981). They had negative self-views of job change, experienced the highest level of stress with much personal illness and had antisocial incidents acted out by family members. Their lifestyles were described as chaotic, hectic, and without short or long term goals for themselves. These women were reacting to situations in their coping styles as earlier described by Beutell and Greenhaus (1983) and Hall and Gordon (1973).

Considering these data, the Creators had the most desirable and positive satisfaction measures and psychological adjustment to problems in the job transitions. Intermediate levels of life satisfaction and efficacious problem solving characterized the

Maintainers and Conventionalists. Clearly, the Reactors had the most stress and chaotic coping (problem solving) styles and were least psychologically adapted to the transitions in job change.

Conclusions

Career-changing coping styles of middle-aged women are different. Personality, attitudes, and attributional satisfaction with the outcome of job change were important cognitive styles. Stress levels were different for the groups perhaps resulting from their cognitive approaches to problem-solving. Social resources of spouse and available money were important in ability to pursue alternatives. The implications of the present data are that as middle-aged women choose, or fail to choose, their next job, they generate for themselves a range of opportunities and potential jobs because they use different job-changing strategies. These predictive variables are suggested to be used as criterion variables in the models of adult development or transition.

Limitations of the study were constricted sample representation, bias in self-report patterns, sample attrition in assessment, and limited generalizations inherent in cross-sectional, one-time assessment design. Nonetheless, the study provides descriptive and exploratory data and tests a prior hypotheses in real life situation--women changing jobs. The *in situ* qualities of this study are considered valuable and instructive for counseling a specific sub-group of people e.g., middle-aged women. In addition, it is hoped that theorists of career development will include the caveats of these findings in concepts

about adult transitions.

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Footnotes

[1] This study is to be presented at the 92nd Annual meetings of the American Psychological Association at Toronto, Canada in August 1984.

[2] My sincere gratitude to the employed women for sharing of themselves and their situations. I gratefully thank the supervisory personnel of this firm for their cooperation and the facilities in which to test.

[3] This project was a portion of the author's dissertation project. Those who assisted in the formulation and fruition are gratefully acknowledged. Graphic illustrations in this paper were generously provided by Dr. M. E. Banks.

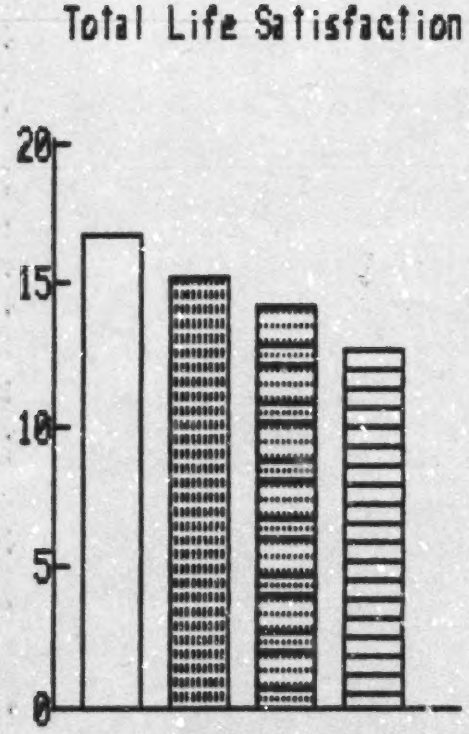

Figure 1. Total life satisfaction of Creators, Maintainers, Conventionalists, and Reactors, respectively.
$F(3,67) = 2.8$, $p = .047$

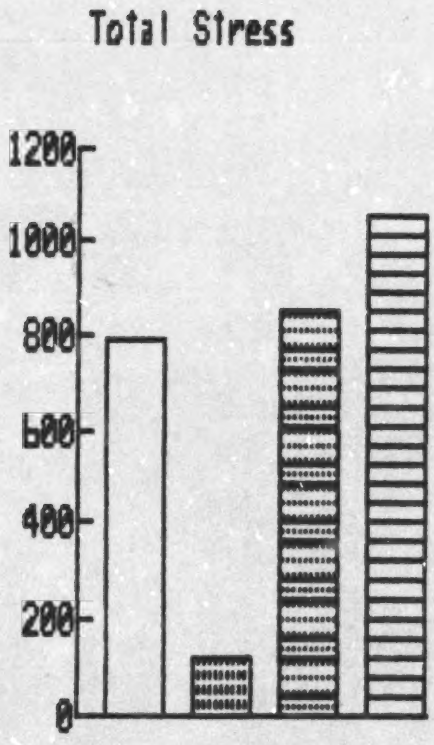

Figure 2. Total stress of Creators, Maintainers, Conventionalists, and Reactors, respectively. $F(27,183)=1.69$, $p=.025$

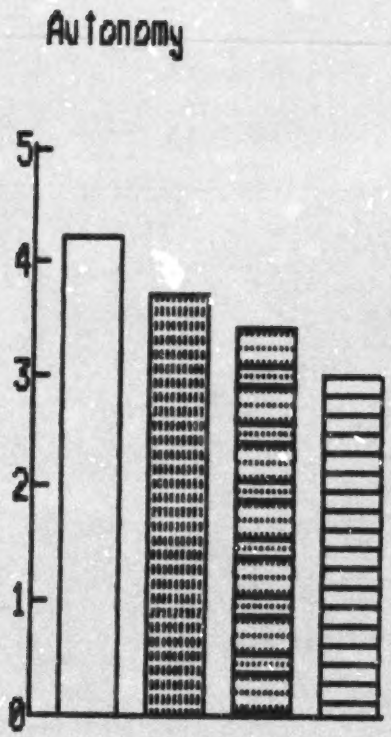

Figure 3. Autonomy of Creators, Maintainers, Conventionalists, and Reactors, respectively.
$F(3,67)=3.3$, $p=.025$

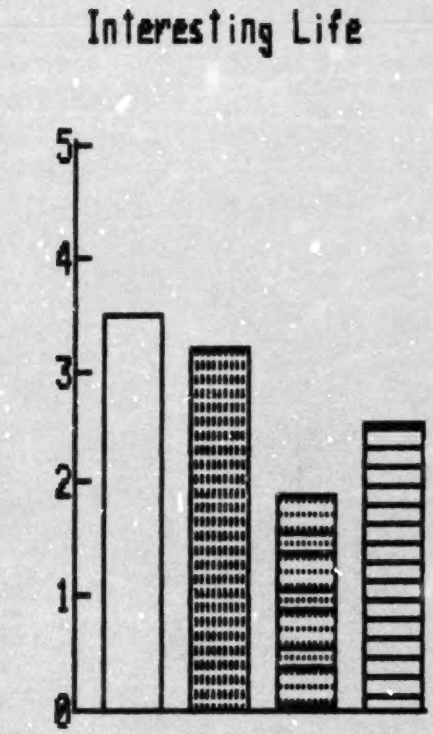

Figure 4. Interesting life of Creators, Maintainers, Conventionalists, and Reactors, respectively. $F(3,67)=4.3$, $p=.008$

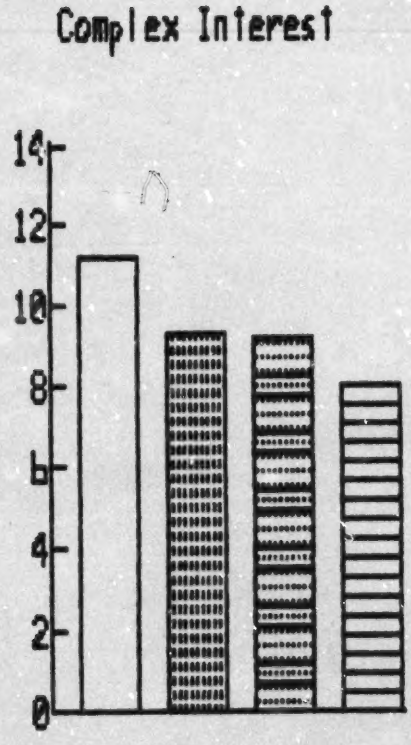

Figure 5. Complexity in interests of Creators, Maintainers, Conventionalists, and Reactors, respectively. $F(3,67)=2.7$, $p=.04$

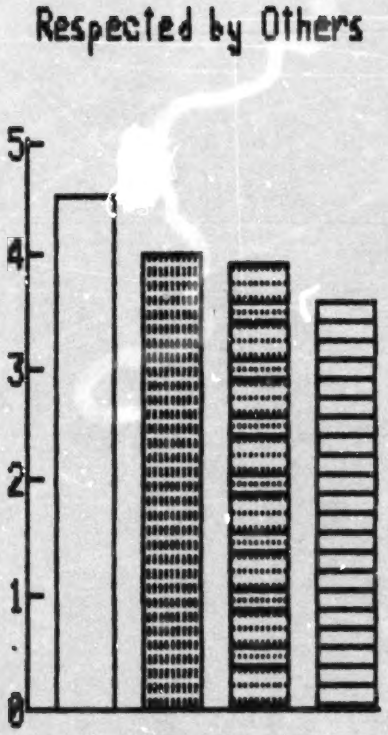

Figure 6. Respect from others of Creators, Maintainers, Conventionalists, and Reactors, respectively. $F(3,67)=3.5$, $p=.02$

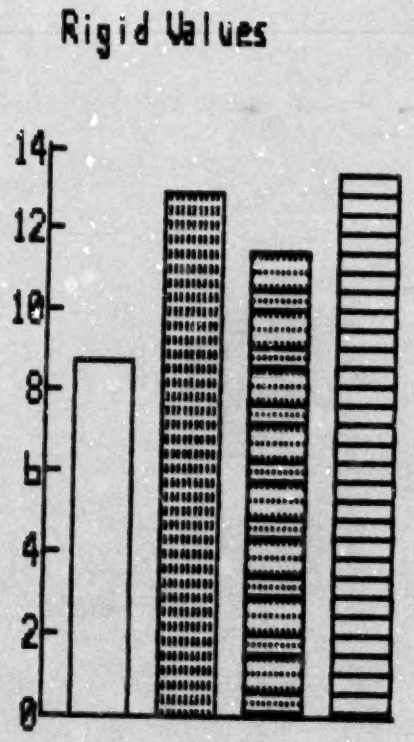

Figure 7. Ridity in values of Creators, Maintainers, Conventionalists, and Reactors, respectively. $F(3,67)=4.3$, $p=.007$

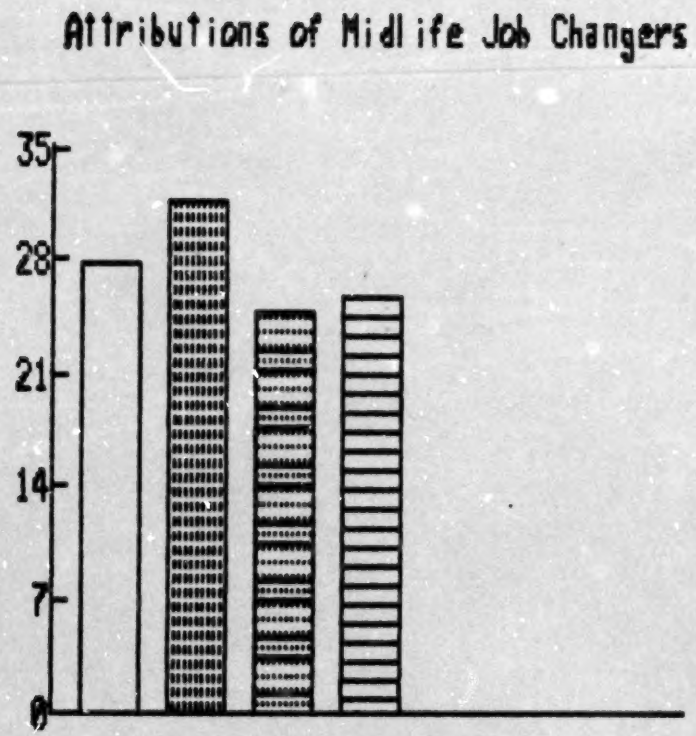

Figure 8. Attributions of the midlife career change of Creators, Maintainers, Conventionalists, and Reactors, respectively.
$F(3,67)=2.9$, $p=.039$